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ABSTRACT

Even in culturally homogeneous settings, language has an important role in the social interaction of adolescents. This study investigated the importance of values concerning dialect and language variation in a group of 62 ninth-grade students. Subjects, 23 black, 21 white, and 18 native Spanish-speaking individuals, were asked to listen to a tape of the following language varieties: standard English spoken by a white speaker, black nonstandard English, English spoken by a native Spanish speaker, and nonstandard English spoken by a white speaker. Subjects were asked to record their reactions to the individual speakers with regard to their intelligence, friendliness, and desirability as friends. Data revealed that all groups rated the white standard English variation most positively. Even the speakers of the other variations in question, black nonstandard English and Spanish-influenced English, expressed a negative evaluation of their own dialects. Findings suggest that language is, indeed, a function in the value system of adolescents. (KS)

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How You Say Is What You Are:

A Study Of Adolescent Language Valuation

Several major studies during the last decade have investigated valuation of speakers on the basis of voice cues. Labov (1966) investigated subjects' ability to evaluate the occupational suitability of speakers. Similar work by Shuy, Wolfram, and Riley (1968) concluded that during adolescence, acute awareness of the social consequences of dialect differences occurs. Wolfram and Fasold (1974) shared these same conclusions and, in addition, identified age as a factor in the speaker's awareness of and attitudes toward language usage.

Considerable work on language stereotyping has also been done by Wallace Lambert and others (1966). In their research, subjects evaluated character and physical appearance on the basis of the variety of language used. Tucker and Lambert (1969) found that some language varieties were consistently rated higher than others. Buck (1968) and Hensley (1970) found that standard English speakers were judged more positively (more competent, friendly, honest, etc.) than those using nonstandard speech.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Plainly, language has an important role in the social interaction of the student even in culturally homogeneous settings. In settings where there are students of an ethnic or racial minority, this relationship is critical.

In this context, the problem is no longer a dyad of black and white. In past years, students from homes in which Spanish was the primary language were, for the most part, found in our Eastern cities and in the Southwest. However, the situation is changing. For example, in the

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New Orleans public schools, where this study was undertaken, the number of Spanish speaking students enrolled in bilingual programs comprise almost 2% of the school population. An additional 1-2% are enrolled in regular classes. In some cities, such as Miami, Florida, the proportion is even greater.

The sociolinguistic problems associated with these data require that the teacher develop an awareness and understanding of the dynamics of language variety as it may be related to attitudes and behavior. One of the more difficult considerations in attaining this goal is that regarding language and its role in valuation and social acceptance among adolescents. It was the purpose of this study to examine the role of values in dialect and language differences within this group. More specifically, the investigation sought answers to three questions:

1. Do adolescents value one language variety over another?
2. Do adolescents perceive a relationship between language variety and other personality characteristics?
3. Does this perceived relationship differ among various minority groups?

COMPOSITION OF THE SAMPLE

The sample for the study consisted of three groups of ninth grade students chosen at random: one black, one predominantly white, and one native Spanish-speaking. In the predominantly white group, responses from black students were eliminated. There were 23 black, 21 white, and 18 native Spanish-speaking subjects in the sample. The total number of subjects participating in the study was 62.

MEASUREMENT PROCEDURES

The subjects were asked to listen to a tape on which was recorded two samples each of the following language varieties: standard English spoken by a white speaker, black nonstandard English, English spoken by a native Spanish speaker or Spanish-influenced English, and nonstandard English spoken by a white speaker. The order of these samples on the tape was determined by random selection. After listening to each of the eight speech samples, students were asked to record their reactions to the speaker by indicating whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, were undecided, agreed, or strongly agreed with five statements. The five statements were:

1. The speaker is intelligent.
2. The speaker is someone I would like to know better.
3. The speaker has a pleasant voice.
4. The speaker is someone who makes friends easily.
5. The speaker is someone I would like to have as a friend.

After all speech samples had been played and subjects had recorded their responses to each speaker, the subjects were asked to complete three incomplete sentences at the end of the opinionnaire. These three sentences were:

1. When white people speak, they _____.
2. When black people speak, they _____.
3. When Spanish people speak, they _____.

To verify authenticity of the speech samples, each tape was evaluated by three persons having expertise in the area of linguistics. These persons verified the tapes as being representative samples of standard English (SE), black nonstandard English (BNSE), Spanish-Influenced English (SIE), and white nonstandard English (WNSE). Tapes not verified as representative were eliminated.

All speech samples were recorded by females. To assure similarity of content, each speaker read a short passage and then summarized it. The paraphrased summary was taped. The length of the taped speech sample was one minute. The total time taken to complete all samples and the sentences at the end of the instrument was approximately 25 minutes.

FINDINGS

Responses were tabulated and the following findings resulted. For the black group, standard English and WNSE were valued more positively. Spanish-influenced English was valued less positively, and BNSE was valued the least positively of all varieties. In the white group, the same pattern was observed. However, this group was more negative in its responses to BNSE than the black or the Spanish were toward any other language variety. The Spanish-speaking group responded similarly in its valuation. However, the subjects in the Spanish group did not strongly disagree on any of the items. Also, with the exception of positive responses to the SE and WNSE speakers, they did not strongly agree with any of the items. In fact, the Spanish group was less polarized on all items than the other two groups. Table 1 shows the total responses by all subjects for the five items and each language variety. ✓

Standard English. A closer examination of the responses to the five items revealed that all three groups agree in a positive way that the SE speaker is intelligent. The Spanish speaking group showed no disagreement with any of the five items. All three groups indicated they would like to know the speaker better with 75% positive responses for the Spanish-speaking group.

Table 1
Total Responses for Five Items

Group 1 (Black)

	SD	D	U	A	SA
SE*	5	13	65	127	20
BNSE**	10	49	94	70	7
SIE***	2	20	90	94	15
WNSE****	2	10	85	119	14

Group 2 (White)

	SD	D	U	A	SA
SE*	4	26	63	96	21
BNSE**	33	94	65	17	1
SIE***	19	70	56	55	5
WNSE****	5	44	86	68	7

Group 3 (Spanish)

	SD	D	U	A	SA
SE	0	3	42	120	15
BNSE	0	36	111	33	0
SIE	0	12	81	87	0
WNSE	0	3	36	123	18

*SE - Standard English
 **BNSE - Black Nonstandard English
 ***SIE - Spanish-Influenced English
 ****WNSE - White Nonstandard English

Eighty-six percent of the black subjects felt that the SE speaker had a pleasant voice, while 68% of the white speakers responded in this way. Ninety-two percent of the Spanish subjects felt that the SE speaker had a pleasant voice. On the item, the speaker is someone who makes friends easily, the black sample displayed ambivalence; 56% of this group was undecided. The Spanish-speaking group registered no disagreement on this item. Fifty-seven percent of the white subjects responses were in agreement with the statement. On Item 5, the black and Spanish-speaking groups (65% and 75%, respectively) indicated they would like to have the speaker as a friend.

Black Nonstandard English. With the BNSE speaker, the black subjects were equally split regarding their valuing of the speaker's intelligence. The white group indicated that the speaker was not intelligent (64%). Indeed, of the three groups, whites were strongest in feeling that the speaker was not intelligent. On the item, the speaker is someone I would like to know, the black and Spanish-speaking groups generally were undecided. Again, the white sample was overwhelming in the feeling that they would not like to know the speaker (67%). It may be important that 58% of the Spanish speaking subjects were undecided. On the next item, the speaker has a pleasant voice, considerably more whites (78%) felt that the speaker did not have a pleasant voice. The black group also felt negatively toward the quality of the black speaker's voice. On Item 4, the speaker is someone who makes friends easily, the prevailing response was undecided for all three groups. However, 38% of the white subjects did express disagreement on this item. For the final item, preference for the speaker as a friend, 50% of the responses from the white group were decidedly negative. Fifty-two percent

of the black sample and 75% of the Spanish sample was undecided.

Spanish-Influenced English. Fifty percent of the Spanish sample were either undecided or did not feel that the Spanish speakers were intelligent. Sixty-eight percent of the white group were undecided or felt that the Spanish speakers were not intelligent. On Item 2, the respondents would like to know the speaker better, there was agreement between the black and Spanish sample. On the negative side, for this item 52% of the whites did not want to know the Spanish speaker better. For Item 3, 60% of the white group felt that the Spanish speaker did not have a pleasant voice. This was the largest negative valuing of any group of any item for SIE. On the item, the speaker makes friends easily, all groups were highly undecided (72%-43%-83%). The largest undecided group was Spanish. Only the white group expressed disagreement or strong disagreement on this item. An interesting note is that although there was general agreement that the Spanish speakers make friends easily, there was disagreement particularly in the white sample, as to having them as friends. Also, interesting is that 42% of the Spanish sample was undecided on this item.

White Nonstandard English. All samples were very positive in concluding that the WNSE speaker is intelligent. Blacks showed the largest percent undecided. The Spanish group showed 100% agreement on this item. On the second item, the subject would like to know the speaker better, the Spanish group was also the most positive. Again, the whites were most negative (26%). On Item 3, the Spanish-speaking group was generally more positive and the white group showed 35% disagreement. On Item 4 the white group appeared less negative toward this speaker than toward the BNSE or the SIE speakers.

The largest percent of the white sample was undecided (64%). Again the Spanish group was the most positive of the three groups. On Item 5, at least half of the black group and half of the white group were undecided. The only group showing important disagreement was the white group. The Spanish group was again the most positive in response to this item. Table 2 summarizes these findings.

The responses to the open-ended statements were generally in agreement with the opinions expressed on the five items. That is, the informants indicated that when white people speak, they "use correct grammar," "pronounce their words clearly," and "speak distinctly." On the other hand, they felt that black people "slur their words", "talk low," "run their words together," "say the wrong things," and "sound bad". The attitude toward the Spanish speakers seemed to be somewhere between these two extremes. For the informants, Spanish speakers "sound funny", "talk so you can't understand them", and "talk very fast".

CONCLUSIONS

These findings appear to suggest the following conclusions:

1. Subjects in the white group were more negative on all items toward all speakers.
2. For the Spanish speakers, the whites felt that they are friendly, but would not particularly care to have them as friends. As a matter of fact, this item shows the largest percent of undecided responses for all speakers for all items.
3. Blacks would like to have SE speakers as friends; however, they do not think that the person would be friendly toward them.

Table 2
Subjects' Responses to Five Items

Speaker	Standard English			Black Nonstandard English			Spanish Influenced English			White Nonstandard English		
	B	W	SP	B	W	SP	B	W	SP	B	W	SP
1. The speaker is intelligent.	SA 02*	12	08	04	02	0	09	0	0	09	07	08
	A 73	62	75	29	09	08	54	31	50	61	52	92
	U 15	14	17	25	24	42	24	26	25	24	17	0
	D 06	12	0	35	52	50	13	28	25	04	21	0
	SD 02	0	0	04	12	0	0	14	0	02	02	0
2. The speaker is someone I would like to know better.	SA 13	19	17	04	0	0	06	05	0	06	02	08
	A 46	35	58	27	09	25	41	21	66	52	24	66
	U 35	38	17	43	24	58	36	09	33	35	48	25
	D 06	12	08	17	50	17	15	43	0	06	21	0
	SD 0	09	0	06	17	0	0	09	0	0	05	0
3. The speaker has a pleasant voice.	SA 17	09	17	02	0	0	04	02	0	02	02	17
	A 69	59	75	35	07	25	48	26	50	74	35	66
	U 06	07	08	17	14	42	17	12	42	17	24	08
	D 06	21	0	36	52	33	27	48	08	04	35	08
	SD 0	02	0	09	26	0	02	12	0	02	0	0
4. The speaker is someone who makes friends easily.	SA 06	05	0	0	0	0	04	02	0	04	02	08
	A 27	52	50	22	07	08	22	24	17	29	24	50
	U 57	31	50	65	50	92	72	43	83	59	64	42
	D 09	09	0	11	38	0	02	26	0	04	09	0
	SD 0	02	0	02	0	0	0	05	0	0	0	0
5. The speaker is someone I would like to have as a friend.	SA 06	14	0	04	0	0	09	02	0	09	02	08
	A 59	19	75	36	07	25	39	28	58	39	26	66
	U 35	62	25	52	43	75	46	43	42	50	52	25
	D 0	07	0	06	31	0	04	21	0	02	14	0
	SD 0	0	0	0	19	0	0	05	0	0	05	0

*Reported in percentages

4. The white sample was overwhelming in negative valuing of BNSE; the black sample also valued BNSE negatively, but not to the same degree.
5. As minorities in an English-speaking culture, Spanish speakers do negatively value their own language variety. However, this negative valuation is not as strong as that expressed by the black group for their language variety. Whites, on the other hand, show negative valuation of black and Spanish speech, with the most extreme valuation toward the intelligence and sociability of the black speaker.
6. The white group appeared more polarized in their responses, while the black and Spanish groups tended to be less extreme in their valuations for all items and for all speakers.

The findings suggest that language is indeed a function in the value system of adolescents. Whether this function is significant in terms of student behavior was not assessed. However, it may be inferred that because of the high importance given to peer acceptance and sociability among youngsters in this age group, any learning situation that involves students of more than one language variety requires that the teacher avoids any reinforcement of latent pejorative values that may exist within the student population.

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